

Book Reviews

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HUMAN RACE?

F.A. Schaeffer and C.E. Koop, Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, N.J., 1979, 256 pp. \$13.95

To quote from this book's dust cover, the authors "analyze the widespread implications and frightening loss of human rights brought on by today's practices of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. They see the present as a crucial turning point. Choices are being made that undermine human rights at their most basic level. Practices once labeled "unthinkable" are now considered acceptable. The destruction of human life, young and old, is being sanctioned on an ever-increasing scale by the medical profession, by the courts, by parents, and by silent Christians." From the authors' descriptions, one would believe that the current scene is a Tophetan one of rampant murder, and that this murder represents a new backsliding by the human race.

This is not a book expressing the joy of life; rather, in the spirit of the minor prophets, it predicts gloom and doom for the human race. It is an unbridled polemic against humanism, existentialism, and materialism. The authors' view on questions of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is simply that such practices are always unacceptable. Of more potential interest for the reader than their viewpoint is the exposition of the reasons for this position.

What troubles many of us is that we observe our heroic efforts to salvage life and see in some cases thoroughly miserable results. We sense that at times, by using available technology we have caused more harm than good. At current levels of understanding we see in many cases no immediate prospects for improving the outlook; and this gives rise to the question of when we should keep trying and when we should abandon the quest. There does seem to come a time when it is legitimate to say we have given our best and failed; why prolong the agony further—to what purpose should we keep trying to save for the sake of saving? There is a growing desire to discuss these problems so as to determine what are the limits of technology and what are our moral responsibilities, both to the defective infant and to other members of society. But Schaeffer and Koop deny the legitimacy of examining the issues so that we can define the limits. Theirs is an inflexible posi-

tion of prohibiting the termination of life, whether active or passive. They are tremendously concerned about a domino effect: If we sanction death under some circumstances, then we will inevitably end up sanctioning it under all circumstances. They do not allow for the possibility of backing off from the decision to sanction death; in fact they flatly deny it (page 110). This position ignores the fact that, historically, infanticide of the deformed was the norm, before the later adoption of more "humane" efforts to salvage and habilitate.

Schaeffer and Koop do, however, make a few important points that deserve a great deal more emphasis in the literature on abortion and euthanasia. "Yet it is constantly to be observed that disability and unhappiness do not necessarily go together" (page 56). "This [euthanasia] board would be merely a way of spreading the decision-making responsibility to many so-called experts. . . ." (page 98). And (scornfully) "In England, some call starving a child with spina bifida (cleft spine) putting it on a 'low calorie diet!'" (page 110). To these and a few similar comments in the text, many of us who deal daily with the deformed can only say amen.

The history of man in regard to abortion, infanticide, and corporal punishment is largely ignored by Schaeffer and Koop; to them history seems to start with the Bible. The precepts of the Bible are held out as the accepted norm and identified as the "Christian ethic." This ignores the vast history of man before the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as the traditions of the majority of mankind that does not accept Judeo-Christian theology.

Whatever Happened to the Human Race is premised on the concept that man was created in God's image and that only God is capable of revealing the truth. It is then an oppressive opus for the reader who wants to discover logical arguments for societal decisions, for if truth is "revealed," there is no need for logic. We seek rationality; instead we are treated to condemnation for not accepting the fundamental truths held by Schaeffer and Koop. We are upbraided for believing our senses and trying to think rationally. We are informed that unless we accept the authors' world view we are sunk deep in despair and madness. This is a distasteful position, and one suspects that most readers would disagree. Most of us agree with Alexander Pope that "the proper study of Mankind is

Man." One can accept not knowing or understanding everything, yet or even ever, without having to adopt a system of instant answers, and without becoming suicidal or ready for the asylum.

Nowhere in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* is the possibility discussed of an empiric adoption by mankind of a "golden rule" as the basic premise of an ethical system. Such a possibility is implicitly denied, since even ordinary biological evolution of man is rejected, let alone evolution of behavior and personality.

As is pointed out in the book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* is based on a "magnificent five-episode color motion picture." Spaced throughout the text are illustrations from the movie; some of them of dubious taste (1,000 plastic dolls strewn on the beach) and pertinence (Shaeffer atop Mt. Sinai). The book becomes a slick and staged presentation by two undoubtedly sincere, highly motivated Christians, who are alarmed by current practices concerning abortion and euthanasia.

The book is not recommended generally. For those who want more temperate discussions from a variety of viewpoints, Marvin Kohl's *Infanticide and the Value of Life* is more suited to their needs. *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* might be of some interest to those who want a fairly detailed exposition of a rigid "Christian" position on the issues. For those who have the inclination and energy to be contentious about an exposition of philosophy, the book is highly recommended.

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INFANTICIDE AND THE VALUE OF LIFE, Marvin Kohl, ed., Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1978, 253 pp. \$15.95

Edited by Marvin Kohl, a philosophy professor at SUNY/Fredonia, *Infanticide and the Value of Life* is a collection of essays whose primary purpose is "to understand what conditions, if any, warrant allowing or inducing the death of a seriously defective infant." The authors, from the fields of medicine, law, religion, and philosophy, present contrasting viewpoints and various styles of writing. They have produced a thoroughly readable book with a good bibliography and mechanics (table of contents, index, footnoting, etc.).

The essays are organized into four sections: 1) religious-ethical; 2) anthropological, psychological, and medical; 3) legal; and 4) philosophical-ideological. Part I contains essays by theologians and ethicists, with two arguing that infanticide is permissible in certain instances and two arguing that infanticide is murder and is therefore never acceptable. Part II comprises five chapters written by an anthropologist, a psychiatrist, a neurosurgeon-philosopher, a pediatrician, and a surgeon. They discuss infanticide in different cultures, killing and allowing to die (active and passive euthanasia), and who should decide the care of defective infants. An unrelated chapter discusses death from child abuse.

Part III presents various viewpoints, written by lawyers and a professor of religion, on laws relating to infanticide or euthanasia for the severely defective child. Part IV contains five chapters by philosophers and a person with myelodysplasia, who discuss the meaning of the phrase "value of life."

This well-written book cannot just be read and put aside; rather it prods us to reflect on the value of life and the conditions, if any, for infanticide (or euthanasia, which sounds better and is somehow easier to accept). Today, few professionals could accept infanticide as it was practiced in some past cultures. But should some severely abnormal children be killed or allowed to die? Which ones? Who decides? How does death come to occur? The who, how, when, and where of infanticide are valid points of discussion in some cases. However, the discussion should never be carried on with a preconceived answer: We must be careful not to force our personal values onto families. Normality is everyone's dream, but it cannot be over-emphasized that many physically and mentally handicapped children can and do lead lives that are enriching to themselves, their families, and friends.

Infanticide and the Value of Life provides no easy answers, but it is highly recommended as a readable, affordable, and well-balanced presentation of a variety of viewpoints on the issues.

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